

*Enquiry into the Sufficiency of
Reason in Matters of Religion.*

Nº 10

A

SERMON

Preach'd before the

UNIVERSITY

O F

O X F O R D,

At St. *M A R T*'s,

On Sunday, *December* 17th. 1738.

THOMAS RANDOLPH, D.D.

Vicar of *Petham* in *Kent*, and late

Fellow of C. C. C.

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2 COR. III. 5.

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves: but our sufficiency is of God.

THE Apostle in the foregoing part of this Chapter speaks in pretty high terms of the Success of his Preaching. He trusts himself a little of the Conversion of the Corinthians: he tells them he has no occasion to commend himself, or seek any Letters of Commendation; which others might ambitiously solicit, and vainly triumph in. The Progress he had made amongst them, and the Change he had wrought in their Hearts, was a more powerful and publick recommendation of him, than any recommendatory Epistle. But then to guard against all appearance of Vanity and Pretention, he immediately seems as it were to correct himself, and ascribes the Success of his Ministry, and his Ability to discharge the Duties of it to the gracious Assistance of God. *Such trust have we through Christ to God-ward. Not that we are sufficient of our selves to think any thing as of our selves: but our sufficiency is of God, who hath also made us able Ministers of the New Testament.*

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The

The Apostle expresses his *Insufficiency* in the strongest terms: he esteems himself not only unequal to the weighty and important Charge of the *Apostleship*, but not even *sufficient* to *think any thing as of himself*. A strong rebuke to those, who thrust themselves into the Ministry without Commission, or without proper Qualifications: and a serious Admonition to those, who are already engag'd in this sacred Office, exciting their Diligence, their Humility, and their Devotion. But these Words of St. Paul, though spoken more immediately with reference to his Office, as an Apostle, are yet express'd in *general* terms, and may very well be applied to Mankind in general. We are none of us *sufficient to think any thing as of our selves*, and all of us in our *private* capacity stand in daily need of the Divine Assistance.

I should enter into too large a Field of Discourse, should I attempt to lay before you the manifold Defects and Infirmities of Human Nature, and set forth the Insufficiency of Mankind with regard to the Will, the Affections, and the Understanding. I shall therefore confine my self to the last of these; and that particularly with reference to a Question, which has of late Years been made the Subject of Debate, concerning the *Sufficiency of Reason in Matters of Religion*. This is indeed a Point, which the Expression here used seems naturally to lead us to---not that we are *sufficient of our selves to think any thing* (λογίζομεθα τι) *as of our selves*: but our *sufficiency is of God*. It has been asserted that *Reason is a sufficient Guide in Mat-*

of *Religion*, and this particularly by the
Deists and *Socinians* : the one of which would
hence conclude that *Reason is the Stan-*
ard of reveal'd Truths, and the other that *all*
Revelation is unnecessary and useless.

The *Proposition* indeed will, I believe, upon
Enquiry be found to be in some Sense true :
but the *Terms* of it are equivocal. The *first*
thing therefore necessary in order to clear up
this Point, will be to examine into the *Terms*
of this *Proposition* : and then, I hope, we shall
be able to discover in what Sense it may be
true, and what may reasonably be inferr'd
from it.

1. *First* therefore, We shall enquire into the
meaning of the word *Reason* : and in the next
Place what it is to be a *sufficient Guide in Mat-*
ters of Religion.

As to the *First*, the word *Reason* has, I am
afraid, been used in a great Variety of Senses.
We sometimes find it taken *objectively*, not for
the *Faculty of reasoning*, but for the *Object*,
which such *Faculty* is conversant about. In
this sense *Reason* signifies the same as *Truth*.
Thus, I presume, we mean, when we talk of
the *Reason of Things*. And thus I conceive
some Writers must mean, (if they mean any
thing at all) who speak of the *Religion*, or
Law of Reason, and attribute *Immutability* and
absolute Perfection to it. But this is a Sense
which the Word cannot admit in the present
Question. *Reason*, in this acceptation of the
Word, can with no propriety be called a *Guide* :

'tis

'tis indeed *the Way it self*, and not *the Guide*, which should direct us in it. To say in this Sense that *Reason is a sufficient Guide*, if it signifies any thing, signifies only that *all Truth is true*:—a Proposition, from which, I believe, nothing can be inferr'd either with regard to the uselessness of Revelation, or our Ability or Authority to judge of it.

Secondly, *Reason* is sometimes us'd for the *Faculty of discovering and perceiving Truth in general*. And in this Sense some Men have attributed a kind of Infallibility to *Reason*. *Neque decipitur Ratio, neque decipit unquam*—is a Sentence often in their Mouths, which can be true in no other Sense of the Word but this. Again, when Men talk of *Right Reason*, it must, as I apprehend, be understood either in this, or the former Sense of the Word. Whatever is agreeable to *Right Reason* is most certainly true: but yet this amounts to no more than saying as above that *all Truth is true*. There are doubtless many Beings superiour to us, who are able to discover more Truths than we can do: and God himself has a most perfect and universal Perception and Comprehension of all possible Truths. But yet his All-perfect Knowledge can be no Guide to us any farther than he is pleas'd to reveal himself to us. In this Sense therefore the Word cannot be taken in this Debate. *Reason in general*, if a Guide, is no Guide to us: nor can we from the Perfection of *Reason in general* infer the Perfection of our own, or the uselessness or non-necessity of Revelation.

Thirdly

Thirdly therefore, by *Reason* in the present question, if we would speak pertinently, we must understand *Human Reason*. But here again, *Human Reason* may be consider'd either as subsisting in the whole Species, or in each particular Individual. If we consider it in the former Sense, it will in the first place be difficult to determine how far *Human Reason* will carry us, and to what Ends it is *sufficient*. We know that God has from the Beginning reveal'd himself to Mankind at sundry times, and in divers manners: and we have great reason to think that the Wise Men of Old were in part acquainted with such Revelations, and that the Heathen World built many of their Notions and Practices on the Remains of them. How far therefore they might have been able to proceed without such Helps we cannot pretend to say: nor can we from their Writings or Reasonings infer the Perfection or Sufficiency of *Human Understanding* destitute of Divine Assistance.

Neither will the *Sufficiency of Human Reason* taken in this View answer the Ends or Purposes intended to be serv'd by this Doctrine. If *Reason* is a *sufficient Guide* to a Socrates, a Cicero, or a Locke, yet still the rest of Mankind will be left without any *sufficient Guide*. They will be still unable to discover who are the best Reasoners, or to judge between them in Points where they differ. *Revelation* therefore may be still useful or necessary to the Bulk of Mankind, notwithstanding this suppos'd *Sufficiency of Human Reason*. Again, supposing *Reason* in this

this Sense to be *the Standard of reveal'd Truth*, then a yet to what use will a *Standard* serve, which if it is lock'd up in a few Hands, while the rest of Mankind know not where to have recourse to it. The generality of Mankind may still be forc'd to admit *Mysteries*, and be oblig'd to believe what they cannot comprehend, notwithstanding this Privilege of *Human Reason*.

The Advocates therefore for *the Sufficiency of Reason*, if they will talk pertinently and consistently, must assert that *every Man's Reason, in particular is a sufficient Guide to him in Matters of Religion*.

II. Let us therefore in the *Second Place* examine in what Sense it may be said to be *sufficient*. For the Term *sufficient* will upon enquiry be found to be equivocal, as well as the Word *Reason*.

First then, a thing may be said to be *absolutely*, and *in it self sufficient* to any End, when it is of it self capable of attaining that End without any assistance or dependance upon another. Such a *Sufficiency* as this cannot, we conceive, be attributed to *Reason in Matters of Religion*, unless it can be asserted, and prov'd that Reason is without any assistance able to discover all religious Truths, which may in any way concern us, and can *of it self* lead us to Happiness, without supposing any indulgence or allowance for it's Weakness. But there is another kind of *Sufficiency*, which I will call *imputative*, or *hypothetical Sufficiency*, in opposition to an *absolute Sufficiency*: and that is when

Truth then a thing is therefore call'd *sufficient*, because it is such as will be accepted, and is able to attain the End propos'd, *not of it self*, but through the indulgence of another. This may still perhaps be made plainer by a familiar Instance. Suppose a Person in Debt. If he is not able fully to discharge all his Debts, his Estate may be said to be *absolutely sufficient* for that purpose: but if being unable so to do, he is notwithstanding admitted to compound, his Estate, though *absolutely*, and *in it self insufficient*, may yet in some Sense be said to be *sufficient*, on supposition of the Lenity of the Law, or the Mercy of his Creditors. Thus so our Reason, though *in it self weak and insufficient*, unable to point out to us our several Relations and Obligations, yet it may be said to be *imputatively sufficient*, on supposition of God's Mercy and Equity, who will require of us no more than what we do, or might have known. And as in the former case the Debtor's Estate would have been *sufficient*, however small it were, so our Reason would *in this Sense* be *sufficient*, though it were much less perfect than it is.

Secondly, We must distinguish between a *Efficiency with regard to the End*, and a *Sufficiency with regard to the Means*. That Guide may be *sufficient with regard to the End*, that certainly lead us to the *End* propos'd by *any Means whatever*: but such a Guide is *sufficient with regard to the Means*, as will lead us to the *End* propos'd by the *best* and *shortest Means*. I shall endeavour to explain

shall soon have occasion to treat of this Point more particularly. Again, it will not follow from hence that *Reason is the Standard of reveal'd Truths, or a proper Judge of every Part of Revelation.* If *Reason* is sufficient to lead us to Happiness, 'tis not therefore sufficient to every Purpose. If God will not require of those, who have no other Guide but *Reason*, to believe any thing *above their Reason*, it will not therefore follow that he cannot reveal to us any Truths *above our Reason*, or require the Belief of them, when reveal'd. If *Reason* will teach us all things necessary to Salvation, it will not therefore teach us all things useful: and consequently useful Truths may be reveal'd to us, which we could not discover without Revelation, and which we cannot fully comprehend, when reveal'd. And therefore this Doctrine of *the Sufficiency of Reason*, when rightly stated, will not serve either the Socinians or Deists Cause.

Thirdly, To say that *Human Reason* is in this sense sufficient, is really to say no more than that God will not impute to us invincible Ignorance. *Human Reason*, they say, is a sufficient Guide in Matters of Religion: why, because God will not require of any Man beyond what he has given him Means and Opportunity of knowing. All this is very true, but is neither more nor less than saying that God will not impute to any Man invincible Ignorance. So that after all these labouring Disputes we are come back again to the good old School-Distinction of *Ignorantia affectata* and *Ignorantia involuntaria*.

ignorantia invincibilis : and have at length discover'd that all this out-cry of the *Sufficiency of Human Reason* is no more than a *Socratic Artifice* of expressing in ambiguous terms what has been by all the World acknowledged in plain terms, and then taking advantage from the ambiguity of the Expression to lead the unwary into Errors, as repugnant to *Human Reason*, as they are to *Divine Revelation*.

But there remains another Consideration behind. If *Reason* is *originally sufficient* to light every Man that cometh into the World, yet it may become *insufficient* through our fault. When Man has brought himself into a state of Sin, the Case will be very much altered: and that Light, which might have been sufficient to preserve him from falling, may not be sufficient to restore him. When Man is broken through the Rules of *Reason*, and forsaken the Guide of his Youth, he must either have recourse to a new Guide, or he must wander in Darkness and Uncertainty. Men might indeed from the Goodness of God entertain reasonable Hopes that he would accept them upon Repentance. But *Hope* is one thing, and *Certainty* another. We cannot obtain the mere Principles of *Human Reason* conclude with *Certainty* that absolute Pardon must necessarily follow Repentance, and therefore this concerning Question must without a Revelation have remain'd for ever doubtful and uncertain. We deny not but that God before the coming of Christ might, and did accept

accept the repentant Offender. But then was not *Human Reason*, or any thing that *Human Reason* could discover, which entic'd him to this favour, but the *precious Blood of Christ*, * who gave himself a *Ransom* for all, to be testified in due time. However therefore *Reason* might be in some sense a *sufficient Guide to Man*, yet to *Sinners* it was in no sense a *sufficient Guide*. It had through *Man's* Default lost it's *original Sufficiency*: and a new Dispensation, and new Covenant of Grace was now become necessary.

In order therefore to set this Point in clearer and fuller Light, I shall close this Debate with some short Reflections on the *Necessity* and *Sufficiency* of the *Gospel-Revelation*.

As to the *First*, a *Revelation* may be said to be *necessary* either with regard to *God*, or with regard to *Man*: either *necessary*, because *God* is suppos'd under some necessity of giving it; or *necessary*, because *Man's* circumstances of necessity require it.

With regard to *God*, we cannot, in the *First* Place, suppose him to be under any *Natural Necessity* of revealing himself. He is free in all his Actions, though determin'd by his own Wisdom, Justice, and Goodness.

Secondly, *God* could not be oblig'd in *Justice*, or *Equity*, to reveal himself to *Man's* kind. The most that *Equity* could demand

then to require of Men only in proportion to
 ng that they might have known. But to pardon
 entitled Offenders, and enter into a new Cove-
 Blood of Grace with them, must be the effect of
 for *abundantly* and *Goodness*.

Thirdly then, if we consider God, as a Be-
 as in ng of infinite *Goodness* and *Mercy*, we must
 h Man receive him by virtue of this Character con-
 d a need to provide some Means of Salvation,
 race whereby Mankind might be reliev'd from that
 plorable and hopeless State they had brought
 int in themselves into. But then this is only a *Mo-*
 this *Divine Necessity*, a *Necessity* consistent both with
 the *Necessity* and *Mercy*: so far indeed from be-
 - *Revealing* inconsistent with *Mercy*, that it arises
 from it.

be said
 God, *Fourthly*, With regard to the *Christian Scheme*
 became particular, as *God's Mercy* determin'd him
 of giving offer Pardon to Mankind, so his *Wisdom*
 circumstance requir'd this should be done in such a manner,
 might secure the Honour of his Laws, and
 satisfy his displeasure against Sin. This by the
 the *Christian Dispensation* is done in the most effe-
Natural manner. What other Methods of Sal-
 s free tion infinite Wisdom might have contriv'd,
 his own presume not to determine: only this we
 term, that, as far as our Conceptions can
 reach, no Means could have been propos'd,
 d in which could so effectually deter Men from
 to Man sinning, or so manifestly display the Di-
 demand *Wisdom, Justice, and Goodness*.

Fifthly,

Fifthly, As to the *Revelation of this Dispensation* we may justly conclude from *God's Goodness* that he would reveal it in due time. But when that Time should come must depend upon other considerations, and must be left to his *Wisdom* to determine.

Lastly then, it was by no means necessary that God should reveal his Gospel to all Mankind. God might through Christ admit Men to Pardon and Salvation, without acquainting them upon what Terms and Motives they were Pardon'd and Sav'd. With regard therefore to particular Persons, a *Revelation* was, like other the Gifts of Nature or Fortune, the effect of *God's free Grace and Bounty*: an high and valuable Privilege, which we ought to be abundantly thankful for; but which no Man could in *Justice or Equity* demand, which God might withhold from one, and grant to another, * *according to his good Pleasure, which he hath purpos'd in himself.*

Again, As to the *Necessity of the Christian Dispensation* with regard to Man, we must likewise distinguish between the *Dispensation it self*, and the *Revelation of that Dispensation.*

With regard to the former, we conceive that *God's Mercy* could not incline him to pardon Sinners in a manner that should be inconsistent with his *Wisdom or Justice*. If therefore his *Wisdom and Justice* requir'd that Satisfaction should be made, and if ** *there is no other Name under Heaven, but that of Jesus*

* *Ephes. 1. 9.*** *Acts 4. 12.*

Dispensation, whereby we must be sav'd, it will follow that the Christian Dispensation is absolutely necessary to Salvation. Since we could not be sav'd without an Attonement, and since we know not of, nor can conceive any other possible Attonement, but that propos'd in the Gospel, we must look upon that, as *absolutely necessary to our Salvation*.

But then, as to the *Revelation of the Gospel Dispensation*, this, though highly useful and expedient, yet cannot be call'd *absolutely necessary to Salvation*. Men might, as I observ'd before, be sav'd without this Knowledge. But yet such Revelation is a thing highly expedient, and much to be wish'd for, to give us assurance of Salvation; more distinctly to point out the Means of it; to afford us greater Assistances, and stronger Motives to follow after it; and to enable us to attain to higher Degrees of Glory. A Revelation therefore, though not *absolutely necessary to Salvation*, yet *necessary to these Ends*: necessary in the same sense that Education is necessary to the Child, Instruction to the Savage, and Knowledge to the Ignorant: nay 'tis far more necessary, as it informs us in Points of the highest importance, and nearest concernment to us. It may be farther observ'd from hence that in proof of the necessity of Revelation we may pertinently alledge *the Insufficiency of Reason*, in the same manner as we alledge *the Insufficiency of Natural Parts*, when we dis-

discourse of the *Necessity of Education*: nor can we better judge of *this Insufficiency* in either Case, than by enquiring into the Practices and Opinions, which prevail'd in Ages and Nations destitute of these Advantages. In vain therefore have the *Socinians* and *Deists* endeavour'd to shift off this State of the Question. *The Weakness of Human Reason* is the only Point we are concern'd to prove in our Disputes with them: and this cannot better be determin'd than by *Fact and Experience*.

Secondly, With regard to the *Sufficiency of the Gospel Revelation* we maintain,

First, that the *Scriptures* are a *sufficient Guide* in all those Senses, in which *Reason* can be said so to be. They shew unto us the *Way of Salvation*; and a diligent Observance of the Rules therein prescrib'd will most certainly entitle us to God's Favour: and this we have most undoubted assurance of, even the Promise of God, who cannot lye.

Secondly, *Scripture* is a *sufficient Guide*, exclusive of *Tradition*, or any other Guide. It supposes indeed the use of *Reason*, but as no other Rule to supply it's deficiencies, God has given us none, nor have we sufficient grounds to expect any.

Thirdly, *The Gospel* is a *Rule absolutely sufficient in it self*. Those, who are well acquainted

ion: no painted with it, need no allowance for the
 ncy in efficiency of their Rule: and those, who com-
 the Pro with the Terms of it, have a *Covenant*
 in Ag title, and *Legal Claim* to the Favour of God,
 vantage and Eternal Life.

the Que Fourthly, As we have now no reason to ex-
 on is the ect any farther Revelation, so we conceive
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 ot better us all such Relations, as any way concern
 ience. us, and all such Duties, as depend on those
 ciency Relations. They are a *sufficient Guide*, not
 only with regard to the *End*, but with regard
 also to the *Means*. * God hath herein given us
 all things that pertain unto *Life* and *Godliness*.
 sufficient They are not only † able to make us wise unto
 ason can salvation, but to furnish us thoroughly unto all
 the Wo and Works: and will lead us unto eternal
 of the happiness by the best, and shortest, and surest
 certainly way.

we have Lastly, The Gospel is not only originally
 the Pro sufficient to lead all those to Happiness, who
 comply with the Rules of it, but it also con-
 de, ex tains a Promise of Pardon to the repentant
 de. lo Offender. This therefore is a *Guide*, which
 t as to the greatest Sinner may follow with safety and
 s, Co confidence. If he will but repent and for-
 fficient his Sins he may from hence receive not
 only reasonable hopes, but certain assurance of
 Pardon and Peace, * * through the tender Mer-
 of our God; whereby the Day-Spring from on

* 1 Pet. 1. 3. † 2 Tim. 3. 15, 17. * * Luke 1. 78, 79.

high

high hath visited us, to give Light to them that sit in Darknes, and in the Shadow of Death, to guide our Feet into the Way of Peace.

Let us therefore possess our selves with just sense of our own Weakness and Insufficiency, and with Humility and Thankfulness, accept and embrace the gracious Assistance which God hath in his Gospel reach'd out to us. *Let us search the Scripture*: let it be our Study, our Rule, and our Guide. But above all let it be our care to conform our Lives according to it's holy Precepts. A Guide can be of no service to those who will not follow it: and *the Light of the Gospel*, if it will not be directed by it, will only serve to upbraid our Transgressions, and aggravate our Guilt.

* Before the coming of Christ God wink'd at those Times of Ignorance: the Failures of those who were under the guidance of unassisted Reason, might admit of some Excuse and claim some Compassion and Allowance. But † *if we neglect so great Salvation*; if in the midst of Light we continue in Darknes, and under the Gospel of Righteousness still persist to practice Iniquity, our Guilt will be inexcusable, and our Damnation unavoidable. ** *It shall be more tolerable for the Heathen and unciviliz'd Nations at the Day of Judgment than for us.* †† *Let therefore our Conversation be as becometh the Gospel of Christ*; answerable

* Acts 17. 30. † Heb. 2. 3. ** Matt. 11. 22, 24. †† Phil. 1.

the Purity of our Religion, and * *worthy*
the Vocation wherewith we are call'd. † For
 we were sometimes Darkness, but now are ye
 light in the Lord: walk as Children of Light,
 doing what is acceptable unto the Lord; by
 the Holiness of our Lives adorning our Pro-
 fession, and convincing Mankind of the Ex-
 cellency of our Religion.

I shall sum up all in the Words of King So-
 mon, a Person, whom we may reasonably
 suppose well acquainted with the Extent of
 human Understanding. — * * *Trust in the*
Lord with all thine Heart; and lean not to thine
own Understanding. In all thy Ways acknow-
ledge him, and he shall direct thy Paths. Be not
wise in thine own Eyes: fear the Lord, and de-
graved thou shalt be from Evil.

* Eph. 4. 1. † Eph. 5. 8, 10. * * Prov. 3. 5. &c.

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